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Comments on Toby Huff's "Civilizational Analysis and Some Paths Not Taken"

Johann P. Arnason

The Weberian legacy

There is much to agree with in Toby Huff's paper, and quite a few things to qualify.

He is, in particular, right to underline the exceptional significance of Max Weber's 1920 *Vorbemerkung* to collected essays on the sociology of religion. This text outlines a comparative perspective still relevant to civilizational studies. Given the recurrent attacks on Weber as a "Eurocentric," it is worth reiterating the points that most effectively disprove this claim. Weber's analysis of the path taken by the Occident focuses on a "concatenation of circumstances," not on any foundational cultural traits or inherent developmental logic. The circumstances are, as a closer look at Weber's comparative studies shows, of multiple kinds: environmental, geopolitical, institutional and cultural. As for the long-term trends, the main emphasis is on rationalizing transformations, but not in a way that would reduce or subordinate history to an evolution of rationality.

The rationalizing processes that brought the Occident to world-historical prominence unfolded in different spheres of life, with correspondingly specific contexts of meaning irreducible to rational premises; comparisons of different civilizations deal with varying combinations of such processes, rather than with contrasts between presence and absence of rationalizing capacities; the particular combination that prevailed in the West and shaped its course is not a guarantee of enduring harmony or continuing progress. Finally, it seems clear that Weber regarded universalistic claims on behalf of Western ideas or institutions as unfulfilled aspirations (he refers to a "developmental direction of universal meaning and validity"), but also as assumptions to be tested through comparative inquiry (that is the implication of "wie wir uns wenigstens gern vorstellen").

All this sets Weber apart from Eurocentrism, at least in the sense of the half-imaginary monster now under fire from mostly even more imaginary post-colonials of all countries. But he adopts – and cannot avoid adopting – the position described by the German historian Wolfgang Reinhard as a reflected and enlightened Eurocentrism.¹ As Weber notes at the beginning, a European scholar setting out to reflect on world history must start with the European historical experience, and with a more or less articulate but revisable pre-comprehension of it. The evidence for a certain Euro-centricity during a given period cannot be ignored; on the other hand, the interpretive and normative projections developed on that basis must be re-examined and scaled down, but that is a matter of long-term inquiry rather than a priori denunciations.

That said, it should be added that Weber's perception of the “West as it is” (Huff's formulation), or was in 1920, calls for some comments. In the context of the times, and, even more so, in retrospect, the neglected aspects of the West merit closer consideration. Weber did not take due note of European expansionism, distinctive and sustained already in the Middle Ages but incomparably more ambitious in intent and global in scope during the modern era. Nor did he consider the other side of this expansionism, the possibilities for reinvention of European patterns in new settings, both by overseas settlers of European origin and by non-European modernizers.

In this connection, his fundamentally misconceived view of Japan should be mentioned. He saw Japan as a case of imported capitalism and argued that this transfer had been facilitated by the lack of clearly defined cultural identity (he refers to a religious “tabula rasa.”) Such interpretations were already at odds with the record of the Meiji period (1868-1913); this was a clear-cut pattern of reinvention rather than mere import, and Japan's very distinctive historical legacy left its mark on the results.

Last but not least, Weber wrote the abovementioned text – his most programmatic one – in the aftermath of a great civilizational disaster, World War I; he lived through this event as a passionate observer, and it can hardly be doubted that his commitment to the German cause, critical though it was, limited his grasp of the unprecedentedly self-destructive turn. There are clear indications that he took a bleak view of post-war prospects (especially in *Politics as a Vocation*), but he certainly did not integrate the experience of the war into his image of the West. Historians now widely agree that World War I was the inaugural catastrophe of the twentieth century; civilizational analysts have yet to take the measure of the war and its consequences, including – in particular – the rise of two major counter-models of modernity, Communism and Fascism.

¹Wolfgang Reinhard, *Die Unterwerfung der Welt*, München, C.H.Beck 2016, p. 27. This book contains a very insightful discussion of European expansionism.

Eisenstadt's contributions

Huff is also right to stress the importance of Benjamin Nelson's response to Weber's work, as well as his moves beyond it. Nelson took the historical genealogy of modern science further than Weber had ever done; he also opened up new comparative perspectives. He overestimated Needham's work on China, but this reference helped him to identify a cross-civilizational field of inquiry, barely visible in Weber's work.² But given Huff's emphasis on Nelson, it is all the more surprising that he should not even mention another scholar who also took a civilizational turn in the 1970s (even if slightly later than Nelson), and was also interested in continuing the Weberian project with more adequate conceptual tools and on a broader historical basis. Here I cannot discuss Shmuel N. Eisenstadt's work in detail, but four crucial contributions to civilizational analysis should at least be mentioned.

First and foremost, though formulated late in Eisenstadt's career, his definition of the civilizational dimension in history and society is, in my opinion, the best of its kind.³ It highlights the intertwining of world-articulating meanings with social institutions, the latter understood as frameworks of interaction, arenas of conflict and configurations of power.

This frame of reference can be understood as an enriched reformulation of Weber's well-known statement on ideas and interests, with the institutional channelling of interests brought into the picture and the world horizon of ideas made more explicit, but also with stronger emphasis on the involvement of power structures in the application of the ideas. Within this framework the interrelations of religion and politics are particularly important; they, more than any other aspect, seem to demarcate the space for differentiation and development of institutions across the social spectrum. It may be objected that this idea of the civilizational dimension does not incorporate the Durkheimian notion of a "family of societies"; but although it is not explicitly mentioned in the quoted text, Eisenstadt's comparative studies show that he took it into account.

² For a judicious critique of Needham, see Robert Finlay, "China, The West, and World History in Joseph Needham's *Science and Civilization in China*", *Journal of World History* 11.2 (2000), 265-303.

³ The key text is S.N. Eisenstadt, "The civilizational dimension in sociological analysis", in id., *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities*, v. 1. Leiden, Brill, 2003, pp. 33-56.

A second contribution, best understood as a specification of the first, is Eisenstadt's interpretation of the Axial Age (roughly defined as the eighth to fourth centuries BCE). This was a period of fundamental cultural change in several civilizational centres. Earlier authors (notably Karl Jaspers, who coined the term) had dealt with this theme from the viewpoint of a philosophy of history; Eisenstadt was the first to translate it into the language of historical sociology. For him, Axial transformations consisted in interconnected changes to world-views, power structures and socio-cultural elites. That said, his view of the Axial Age has come under well-founded criticism for being over-generalized and one-sided, putting too much emphasis on a supposedly uniform distinction between transcendental and mundane reality.⁴ It is the definition of a problematic that remains important, rather than specific theses.

A third point is less developed in Eisenstadt's writings, but potentially very important. It is the idea of modernity as a new civilization, centred on a vision of human autonomy. This core meaning is open to divergent interpretations, applicable in different spheres of social life, and adaptable to various civilizational legacies. It is the background to the more widely discussed notion of "multiple modernities", introduced by Eisenstadt in the 1990s. The multiplication of modernity is based on variations to its common but problematic core.

Finally, Eisenstadt's book on Japan remains one of the most significant works in the history of civilizational studies, although it has not attracted the discussion that it merits. Its argument, and notably the claim that Japan represents a non-Axial civilization surviving into the modern world, is open to fundamental objections; but that also applies to major texts in the sociological canon, beginning with that arch-classic, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*.⁵

⁴ For the ongoing debate on the Axial Age, see two collections of papers: Johann P. Arnason, S. N. Eisenstadt and Björn Wittrock (eds.), *Axial Civilizations and World History*, Leiden, Brill, 2005, and Robert Bellah and Hans Jonas (eds.), *The Axial Age and its Consequences*, Cambridge/MA, 2012.

⁵ For a more extensive discussion of Eisenstadt's work on Japan, see Johann P. Arnason. *Social Theory and Japanese Experience: The Dual Civilization*, London: Kegan Paul International, 1997.

Encounters and transformations

I am in basic agreement with Huff's views on the outcome of intercivilizational encounters in the West, the Islamic world and China. But some contextual qualifications seem appropriate. If we place the two first cases in the context of the transformation of the modern world, we should rather speak of Western Christendom (including what we now call Western and Central Europe) than of a single European or a continuing Western civilization (if we accept Eisenstadt's model); the early modern era saw the beginning of a new civilization, more marked in Western Europe than elsewhere. The question of the "great divergence" between the three post-Roman constellations – Western Christian, Byzantine and Islamic – is not irrelevant to the issue of the "great divergence" between the West and the rest.

Recent scholarship clearly suggests a late date for the full geopolitical, geo-economic and geocultural development of this divergence, but the internal prehistory of that global shift was a long-term process, cumulative but neither teleological nor deterministic, and it did not begin in the High Middle Ages. Trends and patterns of the early medieval period contributed to the specific historical path of Western Christendom. In particular, certain divisions within the religio-political complex had a significant end enduring impact. Most importantly, the problematic and for a long time conflictual relationship between empire and papacy became one of the most formative factors in medieval history (the close alliance forged under the early Carolingians was very short-lived).

The tension between these religious and political centres (both best understood as mixtures of the sacred and the secular) was a key part of the background to the flowering of the High Middle Ages; as the Norwegian medievalist Leidulf Melve has shown, the most acute phase (the so-called investiture controversy of the eleventh and early twelfth centuries) gave rise to a public sphere, a phenomenon previously unknown to the medieval world.⁶ This development paved the way for the invention of universities. But there were further divisions on both sides. In the political sphere, the imperial centre – restored by the Carolingians in the late eighth century - coexisted on varying terms with territorial kingdoms. The empire never exercised the kind of civilization-wide authority that the papacy managed to acquire, but it remained one of the defining institutions of Western Christendom, it tried –intermittently – to win more power to match its status, and when the territorial kingdoms gained strength, one of the legitimizing devices used by their rulers was to claim imperial dignity within their realms.

⁶ Leidulf Melve, *Inventing the Public Sphere. The Public Debate During the Investiture Contest (c. 1030-1122)*, Leiden and Boston, Brill 2007.

The surviving Holy Roman Empire became the historical nucleus of Central Europe, whereas territorial monarchies predominated in Western Europe and shaped its path to modernity. Finally, the division between the secular clergy and the monasteries was a key feature of Western Christian religious culture. It enabled the monasteries to become protagonists of reform.

Comparison with the other post-Roman constellations is needed, but it seems clear that traditional views on Byzantine and Islamic patterns have proved inadequate. Neither the “caesaropapism” long attributed to the Byzantine empire, nor the fusion of religion and politics thought to be characteristic of Islam from the outset, can be substantiated.⁷ A more nuanced comparative approach should probably allow for a combination of partial similarities and a set of deflecting factors.

As for the takeoff during and after the High Middle Ages, there is no doubt about the importance of the legal revolution. But it is hardly possible to isolate it as *the* single decisive factor. The complexity of the context in which it occurred is well described by one of the most distinguished contemporary medievalists: “the strength of local, cellular politics, plus the extension of literate practices to ever-wider social groups, plus a continuing high-equilibrium economic system, plus a newly intrusive state, made possible by taxation, communication and, once again, literacy, helped to create political systems across Europe which allowed engagement, nearly everywhere. This marks the last century of the Middle Ages, not the supposedly late medieval features which mark so many textbooks: crisis, or anxiety, or the Renaissance, or a sense that the continent was, somehow, waiting for the Reformation and European global conquest.”⁸

Constraints of time and space prevent me from discussing the Islamic and Chinese worlds at any length. But one brief remark on each may be ventured. Islam was, as recent scholarship has made clearer than before, the product of a highly conflictual inter-civilizational constellation: the encounter between Sassanid Persia, two Christian empires (the East Roman and the Axumite), the elusive but clearly important South Arabian civilization, and Judaism, the last-named with strong indigenous footholds on the Arabian peninsula. During the rest of the “middle millennium,”⁹ 500-1500 CE, the Islamic world experienced more varied encounters across the Afro-Eurasian macro-region than any other civilization of the times. It is nevertheless clear that these contacts did not translate into anything on the scale of the changes unfolding in Western Christendom, where encounters combined with internal dynamics to trigger the processes mentioned above.

⁷ For a decisive critique of the caesaropapist thesis, see Gilbert Dagron, *Emperor and Priest. The Imperial Office in Byzantium*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2007.

⁸ Chris Wickham, *Medieval Europe*, New Haven-London, Yale University Press 2016, p.256-257.

⁹ This expression is used by the editors of the new Cambridge World History.

Some of the Islamic encounters may even have limited the effects of others. Did the resurgence of Persian culture from the tenth century onwards play a role in marginalizing Greek influences? There seems to be room for further discussion of that question. In any case, the character of what Marshall Hodgson called the "middle periods" of Islamic history (950-1500) remains controversial. It is no doubt legitimate to speak of decline in some fields, but the ongoing re-evaluation of this phase (beginning with Marshall Hodgson's classic work, and continued by various recent authors) casts doubt on the notion of all-round decline or regression. A balanced judgment will have to take multiple trends into account, e.g. the development of Sufi orders and innovations in state formation. Is the affinity with the scientific revolution the only criterion for a comparative history of philosophy? I do not think so. And what about Ibn Khaldūn, the most genuine founding father of historical sociology?

As for China, I think it is now a well-established fact that the reception of Christianity and the early modern scientific revolution was obstructed by an entrenched world-view (in this context, the work of Jacques Gernet deserves particular mention).¹⁰ The decomposition of the Chinese tradition began later, and was closely linked to geopolitical setbacks.¹¹ This does not mean that the cultural crisis was only a by-product of the political one. It opened up a space for extensive and diversified rethinking of the tradition; it is now safe to say that the Marxist-Leninist conversion was a less definitive turn than it seemed at the time. Comparative studies of European and Chinese traditions still have a long way to go. Huff's points about Chinese law seem valid, as far as they go, but how decisive are they? A more contextual analysis of Chinese statecraft might reveal some counterbalancing factors. And the question of "laws of nature" in Chinese thought remains a matter for debate. In 1957, Derk Bodde took issue with Joseph Needham on this point, arguing that while Chinese thought had undoubtedly moved in a direction quite different from European conceptions of law-governed nature, there was some evidence of Chinese thinkers referring to natural regularities in terms not very different from the idea of laws.¹² This would, in other words, be a matter of degree, overall emphasis and long-term direction, rather than a stark contrast between presence and absence. To judge from what I have read on the subject (including, not least, writings of Christoph Harbsmeier), this position is still plausible.

¹⁰ Jacques Gernet, *Chine et christianisme*, Paris, Gallimard, 1990.

¹¹ See the very insightful essay by Mark Elvin, "How did the cracks open? The origins of the subversion of China's late traditional culture by the West", *Thesis Eleven* 57 (1999), 1-16.

¹² Derk Bodde, "Evidence for 'laws of nature' in Chinese thought," *Harvard Journal of Asiatic Studies*, 20:3-4 (1957), 709-727. This text includes an exchange with Needham.